

Comparing Comparing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Comparative Methods and their Histories

Workshop hosted by the Contemporary/Literature DFG-Research Training Group at the University of Bonn, in cooperation with the Society for the History of the Humanities

Bonn, 9–11 July 2025, in hybrid (in person/digital) format

Deadline for abstracts: 31 March 2025

As both a method and fundamental process of concept formation, comparison is central to all kinds of inquiry: it is through comparison that categories emerge, distinctions take shape, and the boundaries of scholarly objects are drawn. While forms of comparison have long shaped the pursuit of knowledge, the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw the rise of comparison as the “preeminent method for finding commonalities across an extraordinary range of aesthetic, social, and scientific fields of research, from philology to anatomy, from geology to sociology.” (Griffiths 2017, 474) This period witnessed both the formalisation of comparison within specific fields and the development of shared comparative frameworks across disciplines. A fundamental feature of this formalisation was the geographical expansion of the scope of inquiry, either in the search for universal truths or to situate spatial discrepancies within linear models of historical progress. At the same time, distinct disciplinary needs and epistemic traditions shaped how comparison was conceptualised and applied.

More recently, the limits of comparative approaches have been a topic of concern. Comparison is entangled with practices of inclusion and exclusion, raising questions about whose knowledge is legitimised, what is rendered comparable, and how boundaries between disciplines, traditions, and histories are drawn. Understanding the historical contexts in which comparative methods emerged, along with their theoretical underpinnings, allows for a more critical reflection on the methodological choices scholars make today. By bringing together scholars from diverse fields, we aim to foster a dialogue on the ways in which these historical perspectives on comparison can inform contemporary methodological debates and practices across disciplines.

We welcome contributions from the humanities, social, and natural sciences, by scholars who wish to:

- 1) explore the historical development of comparative approaches in specific disciplines
- 2) examine the epistemological and methodological challenges comparative approaches pose, and/or
- 3) consider the broader implications of comparison as a tool of inquiry

Research questions may include, but are not limited to:

- What epistemic function does comparison hold within various disciplines? How have these disciplines institutionalised comparative approaches? How have they reflected on this process?
- How do comparative approaches relate to the changing understandings of the historical? What implications does the realignment of geographical scope have for notions of temporality?
- What are the theoretical presuppositions that underlie various instances of comparativism? What ethical and methodological criticisms of comparative approaches exist and how did these arise historically?

To facilitate a productive exchange in such a broadly interdisciplinary setting, participants will be asked to submit a short paper (max. 10 pages) to a reader, which will be distributed internally prior to the workshop.

Accommodation will be provided for the duration of the workshop, and subject to available funds, we will provide support in covering travel costs where required.

A publication is planned.

Please submit a max. 300-word abstract and a short CV in English by 31 March 2025 to smccalll@uni-bonn.de or martina.palladino@ugent.be. Notifications of acceptance will be sent out by 15 April 2025.

Deadline for submission of papers for the reader will be 15 June 2025.